



Flathead National Forest Plan Revision Summary of April 2013 Interviews

Summary of Meridian Interviews - Introduction

Context

In early 2012, the USDA Forest Service released a revised National Forest Planning Rule to provide guidance about how the country's national forests should prepare their Forest Management Plans. The Flathead National Forest (FNF) is committed to engaging interested community members and groups in an inclusive and thorough revision process under the new Planning Rule's guidelines, one which considers the broad range of resources and uses in the forest, and how management decisions may affect adjacent communities. Meridian Institute (www.merid.org) was selected as a third-party neutral through the Udall Foundation's US Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution (USIECR) to assist with the design, facilitation and documentation of the FNF's collaborative engagement strategy.

Interviews

During the second week of April 2013, Connie Lewis and Utsarga Bhattarai of the Meridian Institute traveled to Kalispell, MT to interview a broad diversity of stakeholders who care about management of the FNF. The purposes of these interviews were to learn about forest management issues each of the stakeholders is concerned about, identify challenges facing the upcoming FNF revision, understand what the local collaborative groups that are already underway are accomplishing and how their efforts might compliment other engagement activities, and begin discussions about appropriate ways to include all interest groups in the forest plan revision process. A total of 23 people were interviewed, 21 in person, and 2 by phone or via written correspondence. A list of interviewees is attached in Appendix A. This document is a general summary of the key issues, concerns, and suggestions for public engagement and collaboration in the forest plan revision process as expressed by the people who have been interviewed so far. Meridian is eager to hear from other stakeholders who were unavailable during the week of the in-person interviews, or who have subsequently been identified as having a significant interest in the FNF. Meridian welcomes input from anyone who wishes to contribute to thinking about stakeholder engagement and collaboration in the forest plan revision process.

Summary of Procedural Issues Mentioned in the Interviews

Interviewees had a lot to say about the somewhat improved local climate for civil discourse and the potential benefits of a collaborative process to achieve more understanding and agreement on FNF management issues. They also identified a number of important questions and challenges, which are detailed below.

Collaboration – Value and Structure

Many interviewees indicated general support for collaboration as a way to increase knowledge and build understanding among stakeholders and the agency; bridge differences; enable problem solving that leads to better plans and projects; engender respect and advocates; and potentially develop agreements – especially at the local, e.g., watershed, level. However there were very strong sentiments expressed about the critical importance of not allowing collaborative process to front-load, trump, or overshadow the legally required NEPA process and the development of a range of alternatives.

No-one suggested that collaboration could guarantee the absence of litigation. However, some thought that a strong collaborative effort could help mitigate the chances that litigation would succeed. Others said that avoiding litigation should not even be a goal of collaboration, given its inevitability.

There were a range of opinions about what, if any, kind of collaboration design and structure would be most beneficial to achieve positive outcomes in the FNF forest planning process. Many interviewees expressed skepticism about the notion of a single forest-wide multi-stakeholder collaborative group – for a variety of reasons:

- The FNF is large and diverse, and many of the issues people care about are geographically specific.
- It is hard to imagine a single collaborative group that could adequately represent every interest across the whole FNF, and still be small enough to function effectively.
- There is considerable “collaboration fatigue” already – so it would be hard as well as inefficient to keep a large group of people all actively engaged on all the issues.
- People tend to become more positional and to rely on affiliations rather than direct knowledge and experience when they are dealing with issues outside of their geographic locale.
- The likelihood of further frustration and distrust of the FNF decision making process could be heightened if the collaboration process is diffuse and/or unproductive.

There were a variety of suggestions about alternatives to a single multi-stakeholder collaborative– not necessarily mutually exclusive, including: setting up (or taking advantage of existing) mini-collaboratives in each ranger district (or some other geography that made sense); issue-specific working groups; some sort of coordination body that could help

synthesize and/or reconcile input from different geographies and/or issue groups; a “process steering committee”; ad hoc community meetings; and on-line participation.

A few interviewees also underscored the need for Tribal and inter-agency input and collaboration on the FNF Plan (e.g., involving other Federal agencies and State and local governments) as well as approaching the Plan from a landscape perspective beyond FNF boundaries.

It was also noted that the new Planning Rule characterizes collaboration as a recommendation, not a requirement. With that in mind it was suggested that the FNF might be better served by preparing a “proposed action” without up-front collaborative input (perhaps utilizing the 2006 proposed Forest Plan as a basis, since it was developed with a lot of public comment). Or, at least have the FNF conduct an open discussion with stakeholders about the perceived advantages of collaboration and how to frame a collaborative effort.

Transparency, Inclusiveness, and Accessibility

Interviewees generally concurred that any collaboration process(s) must be transparent, inclusive, and accessible in some way to all interested stakeholders. For example, meetings would need to be open and minutes distributed/posted in a timely fashion, and able to be amended if there were mistakes or omissions. There should be a wide variety of ways for people to learn about the process(s) and to be able to contribute comments and suggestions (e.g., blogs, websites, social media engagement, local media outlets, community meetings around the Forest, personalized outreach for “hard-to-reach” demographics that might not normally participate, mechanisms to ensure representation by regional and national interests, etc.).

Process Ground-Rules, Timeline, and Facilitation

Several interviewees who referenced having had a positive experience to date with the Whitefish Collaborative said that their success was attributable in part to having established agreed-upon operational ground-rules at the outset; a pre-determined timeline (i.e., end in sight); and, a strong, respected, unbiased facilitator. All of those features were recommended for any new collaboration process(s).

Participation

Most interviewees assumed a defined membership for any collaborative(s) (as long as non-“members” could be informed about and contribute ideas to the process). There were a range of views about determining membership. Some thought it would be important to try to draw in people who have an active interest in the Forest’s management even if they are skeptical about collaborating. Others thought that agreement to at least “try to collaborate in good faith” was an essential pre-requisite to membership. Several said that having constructive, “bridge-builder” type personalities would be helpful. A number of interviewees also talked about the need for proxies for constituencies who are not local and/or who just would not show up themselves.

Relationship to Existing Collaboratives

Many stakeholders suggested using existing collaborative groups (e.g., Whitefish Collaborative, Island Range Collaborative, Swan Lake Collaborative) as building blocks and/or models for additional or more broad-based collaboration because in some cases they have already established trusting, working relationships among diverse stakeholders. Some said that the FNF Resource Advisory Committee (RAC) could be a useful starting point for a forest-wide collaborative effort. Others thought the RAC's focus and membership was too narrow for that purpose.

Forest Service Role

Most interviewees concurred that Forest Service participation in collaborative process would be both positive and necessary. Various interviewees suggested that the FNF role should include:

- Assuming leadership at the outset by articulating a vision for the FNF
- Defining boundaries and sideboards for the discussion by clearly identifying “immoveable” issues that cannot be addressed at the forest level because of existing State and federal laws and regulations
- Explaining financial and other constraints and realities (without dampening creative thinking)
- Serving as a technical resource.

Substantive Focus

Several interviewees said that it could add efficiency to review the FNF Proposed 2006 Forest Plan, which was never finalized, for relevant elements that could form a partial basis for the new planning effort. However some interviewees would prefer to start from scratch, noting significant flaws in the 2006 Proposed Plan.

The question of how to distinguish forest-wide issues (i.e. that are relevant for the FNF Forest Management Plan) from localized, project level issues is one that many interviewees struggled with. The cross-cutting issues heard during the interviews included: noxious weeds and invasive species; fisheries and water quality; access to, and timing of, land and water based recreation; road closures; and grizzly bear and lynx habitat.

Additional Challenges and Concerns

Interviewees articulated a number of additional challenges and concerns that need to be considered and addressed:

- Having a few vocal participants overshadow other voices.
- Maintaining participation and momentum during the upcoming summer months when many interested stakeholders are especially busy.
- Determining the relationship to the Grizzly Conservation Strategy.

Summary of Substantive Issues Mentioned in the Interviews

The forest management issues on the FNF are complex and inextricably interlinked. The following summary is somewhat arbitrarily categorized, and reflects the broad range of perspectives expressed during the interviews on each set of issues and a sense of where there appears to be some commonality, rather than every single point that was raised.

Timber Harvest

Views about timber harvest on the FNF included concern about inadequate supply of timber from the Forest to sustain demand and jobs in local mills; concern about potential threats to lives and property from forest fires in the absence of more active forest management, especially in the wild land urban interface; worry about how increased road density for timber harvest purposes might impact wildlife; and, concern about forest health and diversity considerations.

There was considerable agreement, even with the diversity of views, about which parts of the FNF are more appropriate for timber harvest and which for other management priorities.

Wildlife

The wildlife issue most frequently mentioned in the interviews was about grizzly bear management. Others included invasive lake trout, lynx, and wolves. Some interviewees advocating for continuing stringent (or more stringent) protections for grizzly bears, and others for a re-evaluation of what protection is necessary in light of rebounding grizzly populations. A few interviewees said there was a need for better information, based on current technology, than is currently available from the South Fork Study which were used as a basis in Amendment 19 for road density standards in grizzly habitat.

There was broad agreement about the importance of wildlife and fish values on the FNF.

Recreational Uses and Access

Interviewees talked about a wide range of recreational issues on the FNF, including the desire for more recreational access by certain users and concern that limiting access could result in weakening some people's interest in the land by thwarting their opportunity to experience and admire it; conflicts between different recreational user groups; and, concerns about recreational use impacts on other resources. Examples of specific concerns and needs, in no particular order, included:

- More access for fishing (e.g., at Hungry Horse Reservoir)
- Better, more thorough recreational carrying capacity and needs assessments
- High costs associated with environmental assessments being borne by small businesses

- Questions about the scientific basis for restricting the use of llamas
- Deeply conflicted views about potential wilderness designation and how it would impact various users (for better or worse – based on the perspective)
- Trail maintenance backlog
- Inability to access previously open areas and desire for more trails for motorized users
- Unrealized opportunities for additional roads in already heavily managed areas of the FNF
- Need to better differentiate winter and summer motorized use
- Better education and enforcement around ethical motorized use standards
- Safety for horses in mixed use circumstances
- Frequent turn-over in FNF recreational staff

There was deep appreciation among all the interviewees for the recreational amenities available on the FNF.

Wilderness

As noted above, wilderness is a hot-button issue for many stakeholders – some passionately in favor of additional wilderness designation and others passionately against it. Proponents pointed to the fact that many other western states have comprehensive wilderness bills, but Montana does not, in spite of the fact that the State, and the FNF in particular, has spectacular wilderness values that lack the permanent protected status that comes with wilderness designation. Opponents of additional wilderness cited use restrictions that would come with wilderness designation; concerns about additional limitations on access for hazardous fuels mitigation and fire-fighting; and, the possibility that wilderness designation would attract large number of visitors to the area, perpetuating congestion and pollution.

Essentially all interviewees concurred on protecting wilderness characteristics by prohibiting roads and limiting some uses in certain places on the FNF, even though the “sides” expressed diametrically opposed views about actual wilderness designation.

Roads

Roads have already been referenced under a number of other issue categories. Additional concerns about roads included:

- Use of “temporary” designations to build roads in grizzly habitat in ways that are fiscally and environmentally irresponsible.
- Road closures equating to loss of valuable resources.